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ENG 3702-051: American realism and naturalism

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ENG 3702: American Realism and Naturalism

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Summer, 2007
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Required Texts:

Frank Norris, *McTeague*
Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*
The Norton Anthology of American Literature, vol. 2, 5th edition (eds. Nina Baym et al.)

Additional texts available through Booth Library e-reserve system

The Civil War had a seismic effect on America's self-image. Prior to 1860, Americans had been taught to think of themselves as exceptional in many ways, and they had grown used to viewing the North American continent as a great blank canvas it was their manifest destiny to inscribe. But after 1865, with the end of the Civil War, the death of over half a million American combatants, the close of a tortured debate over the crime of chattel slavery, and the first assassination of an American president, Americans required a new narrative to tell themselves about themselves. The project of Reconstruction—the re-integration of the old Confederacy into the Union and the transformation of millions of former slaves into full-fledged citizens—spawned the advent of Jim Crow laws in the South as well as new white supremacist movements such as the Ku Klux Klan. The extermination or relocation of millions of Native Americans now complete, the government declared the frontier officially closed, thus ending the giddy race westward upon which so much idealism and ideology had been built. Turning away from the western horizon, more Americans than ever were moving to cities like Boston, New York, and Chicago, where many would be overworked and impoverished in factories and ghettos. And for the first time, America would become an imperial power, gaining territories in the Caribbean and the Philippines and re-fashioning itself after the image of its old European antagonists in the process. In short, Americans living in the decades after the Civil War had as much cause to be unsure about their national identity as to be anxious about their future.

In this class, it is our task to examine the ways in which Americans writing after the Civil War but before the First World War engaged new, seemingly intractable problems. These problems include: the nature and value of "individualism" in a society that has consolidated itself into cities and factories; the relation between public and private spheres in a democratic society increasingly dominated by corporate capital; the tensions and antagonisms occasioned by unprecedented levels of immigration; the meaning of Darwinistic thought for a culture increasingly divided between the affluent and the poor; and the reconsolidation of white supremacist forces during and after Reconstruction.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & POLICIES:

An essay, approximately ten pages or 2000 words in length. This essay is due on the last day of class and requires you to formulate a closely-crafted argument that takes into consideration historical documents from the era of the work's publication. For the final paper, students are required to use secondary critical works, and to situate their argument alongside current scholarly consensus regarding the work at hand. A handout on this assignment will detail these requirements further.

Two examinations, one held at the end of our second week and the other during the final exam period. These exams will consist of an objective section along with an essay section requiring you to write extended, well-crafted answers to pointed questions about the readings. The objective section will be made up of simple identifications—simply completing the readings carefully should prepare you to do well on these questions. The essay sections, though, will require you to put the skills we develop in class to work: skills of close reading that allow you to point to the way in which an author's choice of language helps to shape meaning.

A presentation of about ten minutes, wherein you guide the class through a "close reading" of an important passage from our assigned reading of the day. The goal of this presentation is to help the class begin a discussion about the text that is focused on a particular idea and—most importantly—the way the language of the text helps the author shape that idea. During these presentations I want to see you using the kinds of close reading skills I'll be modeling in class and that we'll be developing together through discussion. The most important thing to remember here is that your job is to show how a close attention to the literariness of the language on the page (i.e., its metaphors, its images, its sound, its rhythm, etc.) allows us to access a level of meaning that we would lose if we simply read literally (e.g., without paying attention to such things). I also want to encourage students to use the online historical archives through Booth Library to prepare their remarks during these presentations. In that case, you may decide to show us how understanding a particular historical event or concern of the era when the text was produced can also help us to understand how that text produces meaning. If you decide to use historical documents in order to guide your close reading, you should provide copies to the class.

Participation in discussion: The course will be conducted primarily as a discussion course (supplemented with occasional lectures from me). As you surely know by now, such a course is only truly successful if a high percentage of students participate; it can be unappealing if the discussion turns into a dialogue between the professor and a small handful of students. To make the discussion run well: 1) *you should plan on participating*—at least making a comment or asking a question—every day; 2) *you should be careful not to dominate discussion* (i.e., those of you who are not shy should give other students an opening to participate); 3) *you should participate with tact and civility* (take other people's remarks and questions seriously, don't interrupt, respond courteously, etc.). The grade for participation will depend upon meeting all these criteria. If given, occasional reading quizzes will be brief, designed to encourage everyone to keep up with the reading, and will also help me to determine participation grades.

One last note on participation: Participating well doesn't simply mean talking a lot—it means frequently making comments showing that you are engaged in a process of careful, close reading. Idle talk—the kind that simply does not indicate close engagement with the materials we'll be studying—does not help move the conversation forward, and hence does not help one to gain a high score for participation.

I want to be utterly clear about this: Good participation does *not* require you to come to class knowing all the "answers," but it *does* require you to understand certain things about a text. For instance, one cannot participate competently if one does not understand the events that make up the plot of a work of fiction, or the literal argument of an essay. When we meet to discuss our readings, I will assume that everyone understands the literal level of "what happened" in the text; from this elementary level of understanding the words on the page, we will aim toward a more fulfilling grasp of the text's place in the period we're studying. If you *don't* seem to know the plot of the work, I will assume that you aren't reading, and I'll regard anything you have to say as idle talk.

Final Grades will be determined by this formula:

Exam #1.....	20%
Exam #2.....	30%
Essay.....	30%
Presentation.....	10%
Participation.....	10%
	100%

Attendance will be taken at each class. I allow every member of the class to take a personal day for whatever purpose required—illness, family loss or emergency, car problems, personal difficulties, whatever—without penalty. After a student exceeds one absence, however, they will be considered overcut. Overcutting by one absence (i.e., being absent twice) will result in a lowering of the final grade by a letter grade; being absent three times will lower the final grade by two letter grades; and being absent four times will result in a lowering of the final grade by three letter grades. In no case may a student accumulate more than four absences and still pass the course. In cases of prolonged illness, students should seek a medical withdrawal.

Students who tend to show up for class a few minutes after it has started should find a professor who is into that and take their course instead. This professor is irritated by it and reacts badly.

Students are responsible for reading all of the material on this syllabus on the date assigned whether or not the work is actually discussed on that date. Students are cautioned that many of the readings are lengthy. I urge you to begin these readings as soon as possible. Occasionally, I will pass out brief, photocopied materials not represented on the syllabus; these are to be read by the next class.

You are not welcome to e-mail me while you are a student in this course. When you have a question, problem, or concern, I want to sit down with you and talk for as long as you need. That's why I keep office hours. I also want to talk with you about interesting ideas you have this semester, just as I want to talk with you—personally—about the readings we take on. But too many students these days use e-mail as a way to avoid their professors, a practice I resist obstinately. When you need to communicate with me, attend my office hours, make an appointment for an alternative time, call me at my office (581.6302), or if it's very important and the other avenues have not worked, call me at home (348.6144). We'll talk.

Reading Schedule

Week 1

Monday, 14 May: Course Introduction; Samuel Clemens, "The Literary Offenses of James Fenimore Cooper" (handout)

Tuesday, 15 May: Clemens, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, pp. 28-95

Wednesday, 16 May: Clemens, *Huck Finn*, pp. 95-151

Thursday, 17 May: Clemens, *Huck Finn*, pp. 151-216

Friday, 18 May: Joel Chandler Harris, "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" (426-27), "Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Brer Fox" (427-29); Charles Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine" (617-24), "The Wife of His Youth" (pp. 624-32)

Week 2

Monday, 21 May: Thomas Dixon, from *The Clansman* (e-reserves); Booker T. Washington, from *Up From Slavery* (pp. 581-89; 595-603); W. E. B. DuBois, from *The Souls of Black Folk* (pp. 713-36)

Tuesday, 22 May: Kate Chopin, "Desirée's Baby" (e-reserves); Sarah Orne Jewett, "The Foreigner" (pp. 438-54)

Wednesday, 23 May: Thorstein Veblen, from *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (e-reserves); Charlotte Perkins Gilman, from *Women and Economics* (e-reserves); Andrew Carnegie, "The Gospel of Wealth" (e-reserves)

Thursday, 24 May: Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (pp. 657-69); Jewett, "A White Heron" (pp. 431-38; Chopin, "The Storm" (pp. 464-67)

Friday, 25 May: First Examination

Week 3

Monday, 28 May: Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (pp. 25-118)

Tuesday, 29 May: Wharton, *House of Mirth* (pp. 118-201)

Wednesday, 30 May: Wharton, *House of Mirth* (pp. 201-64)

Thursday, 31 May: Wharton, *House of Mirth* (pp. 264-305)

Friday, 1 June: No class meeting

Week 4

Monday, 4 June: Henry James, *Daisy Miller* (pp. 285-323), *The Beast in the Jungle* (pp. 341-70), *The Real Thing* (pp. 323-40)

Tuesday, 5 June: Stephen Crane, "The Open Boat" (pp. 743-60), "The Blue Hotel" (768-87), "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (pp. 760-67); Hamlin Garland, "Under the Lion's Paw" (646-55)

Wednesday, 6 June: Frank Norris, *McTeague* (pp. 1-80)
Wednesday evening: *Deadwood* season 1, episode 1 ("Deadwood")

Thursday, 7 June: Norris, *McTeague* (pp. 80-175)

Friday, 8 June: Norris, *McTeague* (pp. 175-301), final essays due

Second examination to be held during finals period, date and time TBA.